Concrete for Shed Bases: What to Consider Before You Pour

Pouring a solid concrete base for a shed, patio, or garden path can transform a muddy patch of ground into a durable, usable surface. Ready-mix concrete makes this job far simpler than mixing your own by hand, but it does require some planning. Understanding the different grades of concrete, how to prepare the ground, and what to expect from a delivery can mean the difference between a long-lasting base and one that cracks or sinks.

What Is Ready-Mix Concrete and Why Use It for Outdoor Bases?

Ready-mix concrete is delivered to your site already mixed, with the correct proportions of cement, aggregate, and water. The supplier blends it at a plant and then transports it in a rotating drum truck, so the concrete arrives consistent and ready to pour. For projects such as shed bases, patios, and pathways, this consistency matters. A base that is too weak can crack under the weight of a shed or garden furniture, while a mix that is too wet can shrink and crumble over time.

When you order ready mix for outdoor bases, the supplier will ask about the intended use. A lightweight garden shed, for example, needs a different specification than a large patio that will take foot traffic and a table and chairs. The concrete's strength is measured in grades, with C10 being a lean mix suitable for light-duty work and C30 or C40 offering much higher compressive strength for driveways or heavy structures. Knowing which grade suits your project saves money and avoids disappointment.

Choosing the Right Concrete Grade for a Shed Base

A shed base does not bear the same load as a driveway, but it still needs to stay level and resist frost heave. For a standard domestic shed, a C20 or C25 mix is often sufficient. Some suppliers recommend C30 for any base that will hold a heavy item such as a workshop, a greenhouse with stone floors, or a large water tank. The key is to think about the maximum weight the base will ever carry, not just the shed itself. If you later add shelving, heavy equipment, or a workbench, the concrete should already be strong enough.

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For patios and pathways, C20 is a common choice. These surfaces experience foot traffic and weather exposure but not concentrated loads. A pathway, in particular, benefits from a mix that is workable enough to be tamped and levelled without excessive effort. One important point:

ready-mix concrete for outdoor bases should always include an air-entraining agent in frost-prone areas. This creates tiny air bubbles that allow water to expand when it freezes without cracking the surface.

Preparing the Ground: Subbase and Drainage

Concrete is only as good as what sits beneath it. Before any concrete arrives, the ground must be excavated to a depth that accounts for both the subbase and the concrete slab. For a shed base, a typical total depth is around 150 mm, with 75 mm of hardcore or MOT Type 1 stone beneath 75 mm of concrete. The subbase provides drainage and a stable platform, preventing the ground from shifting under the slab.



Compacting the subbase is essential. Loose stone will settle over time, creating voids that cause the concrete to crack. A vibrating plate compactor or a heavy hand tamper can do the job, but the subbase must be firm and level. If the ground is clay or poorly draining, a layer of building sand or a geo-textile membrane can help stop the subbase from mixing into the soil below.

Slope the ground slightly away from any existing buildings or walls. A fall of about 1:80 (roughly 12 mm per metre) is enough to let rainwater run off the slab rather than pool on the surface. For a shed base, a gentle slope away from the shed door is a practical detail that many people overlook.

Formwork and Reinforcement

Formwork is the temporary frame that holds the concrete in place while it sets. Timber boards screwed together and braced with stakes work well for most garden projects. Make sure the top edges of the formwork are at the correct finished height and that they are level. Any dips or bumps in the formwork will show in the final slab.

Reinforcement is not always necessary for a small shed base, but it adds toughness. A steel mesh reinforcement (often called A142 mesh) laid in the middle of the concrete depth helps control cracking. For a patio or a pathway that spans more than two metres, reinforcement is a sensible addition. The mesh should be supported on plastic chairs so that it sits in the centre of the slab, not on the subbase.

Pouring and Finishing the Slab

When the ready-mix truck arrives, you need to work quickly. Concrete begins to set within a couple of hours, depending on the temperature. Have your tools ready: a shovel or rake to spread the concrete, a straight board to tamp it level, and a float or trowel for the surface finish. It is wise to have a helper or two on site, especially if the pour is larger than a small shed base.

Pour the concrete into the formwork and spread it evenly. Use a piece of timber longer than the width of the slab to screed the surface, moving it back and forth in a sawing motion. After levelling, tap the formwork gently with a hammer to release trapped air. For a smooth finish, go over the surface with a float once the water sheen has disappeared. For a non-slip finish on a path or patio, a soft brush dragged across the surface creates a light texture.

Expansion Joints

Concrete expands and contracts with temperature changes. Without expansion joints, a large slab will crack along weak lines. For a shed base under 2.5 metres in either direction, you can pour the slab as one piece. For larger areas, cut or form joints every 2 metres or so. These can be created by inserting a thin strip of compressible material into the wet concrete, or by sawing a groove the day after pouring. The joints allow the concrete to move without random cracking.



Curing the Concrete

Curing is the process of keeping the concrete moist while it gains strength. The first few days are critical. In warm weather, cover the slab with damp hessian or polythene sheet and keep it moist. In cold weather, protect it from freezing. Concrete that dries out too fast will lose surface strength and may dust or craze. A week of curing is a good rule of thumb, but leaving it longer is even better.

Avoid walking on the slab for at least 48 hours, and do not place a shed or heavy items on it for at least a week. Full strength takes 28 days, though the concrete will be hard enough for light use after a few days.

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

One frequent error is ordering too much or too little concrete. Calculate the volume in cubic metres: length times width times depth (all in metres). Add a small margin of about 5% for spillage and uneven ground. Asking the supplier for advice on volume is always sensible if you are unsure.

Another mistake is pouring concrete onto wet or frozen ground. Water trapped beneath the slab will expand when it freezes, lifting the slab and cracking it. Wait for dry weather, and if the

ground is frozen, wait until it thaws.

Some DIYers forget to compact the subbase properly. A base that feels firm underfoot can still contain air gaps that settle later. Taking the time to compact each layer saves fixing a cracked slab later.

Finally, do not add extra water to the concrete to make it easier to spread. Ready-mix concrete arrives with the correct water content. Adding water weakens the mix and can cause shrinkage cracking. If the concrete feels stiff, use a mechanical vibrator or a tamping board to work it into place instead of diluting it.



Putting the Right Base Down

Choosing concrete for shed bases, patios, and pathways does not need to be complicated. The main decisions are the concrete grade, the depth of the slab, and the quality of the ground preparation. A C20 or C30 mix with a compacted subbase and a slight slope for drainage will serve most garden projects well. For a budget-friendly option on a small shed, C10 can work, but it is worth upgrading if the structure will carry much weight.

Using ready mix for outdoor bases removes the guesswork from mixing and guarantees a consistent product. The supplier takes care of the blend, and you focus on the prep and the pour. With good formwork, proper curing, and a little patience, the result is a flat, strong surface that lasts for years.

For anyone in the East Midlands looking for a reliable supply, Stacey Concrete Ltd, based at Ryder Point Works, Wirksworth, Matlock DE4 4HE, UK, offers ready-mix concrete grades C10, C30, C40 and more, with delivery across the region. Their team can advise on the right mix for a shed base, patio, or hardstanding, so you get the right concrete for the job.

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